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ABSTRACT

An upper-division graduate level course at a Northwestern university teaches storytelling by using a rhetorical approach. Students submit three story summaries in assigned format at each class session. Each summary includes a statement of the point or moral of the story, a complete bibliography, and a listing of the story's source. The assignment supplies the beginnings of a bibliography which, if continued, will provide good background for future story-telling. It also focuses attention on plot lines, offering a coherent view of the story itself, independent of character and scene. Repetition at this fairly intensive level establishes a habit pattern, and continuing the repetition with less intensity helps to cement the habits over time. Another popular assignment is an actual storytelling performance; in preparation, students submit tellers' outlines (comparable to the kinds of outlines used in public speaking courses) which include: (1) audience analysis--for whom is the story intended? (2) purpose; (3) bibliography; (4) introduction--the means by which the audience will receive a story and perceive its meaning; and (5) summary, including some reference to character development and scenic elements. Grading of all these elements emphasizes rhetorical factors such as audience adaptation, coherence of the planned presentation, and evidence of systematic thought. (Fifty references are appended.) (AEW)

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STORYTELLING TAUGHT AS RHETORICAL ACT

A paper presented to the Speech Communication Association

Chicago, Illinois

November 16, 1986

by

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Let me begin with a Hasidic narrative as recorded by Elie Wiesel:

> When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.
>
> Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer." and again the miracle would be accomplished.
>
> Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: "I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.
>
> Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient.
>
> God made man because he loves stories.[1]

Justification for this study

Walter Fisher's article on the narrative paradigm[2] may not have caused it, but that article clearly fits within and records a change taking place in our culture. Everywhere, it seems, narrative is being "rediscovered" as the fabric woven of our thought and our experiences. Fisher noted that narrative is more than a mode of argument, but is, in the final analysis, a better overall paradigm for argumentative thought than is traditional logic or expository analysis. This is true, Fisher argued, because the narrative form is closer than are other forms to real experience. Also, as Fisher carefully pointed out, all previous paradigms--especially the traditional logical paradigm--are elitist, requiring special knowledge; are badly misused, requiring constant attention to whether their forms are being properly applied; and are formal, requiring a restructuring of thought to make them work. Narrative, on the other hand, while it does not correspond absolutely to truth, is nearer to the phenomena of practical existence than are these other modes. As such, it is more fitting for a democratic society, more easily subject to corrective attention, and more simply applied to real

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1. The Gates of the Forest (New York: Avon Books, 1967), 6-10.

2. Communication Monographs 51 (March 1984), 1-22.

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experiences than are the other forms of argument.

On this basis, which I have of course distorted by truncation but not by design and, I hope, not unfairly, Fisher argues--and most of us agree--that narrative is at least one viable paradigm for argument. Whether or not it subsumes all other paradigms is a question for later debate, but it seems clear that the narrative paradigm is significant and useful for both construction and analysis of arguments.

On the other hand, and without disrespect to Walter Fisher, I think it is worthwhile to note that he did not invent the narrative. As he pointed out in that article, his was not the first approach to the issue of narrative's import, in or out of our field. He was, I believe, what he claimed in that article to be: the first to call for argumentative paradigmatic status for the narrative form. But especially outside the Speech Communication field, it seems that narrative has in many cases been adopted de facto, even without a theoretical base in argumentation theory, as the basis for much of the most important argument that is going on.

One of the most significant such fields, and one of the two on which this paper overlaps rather heavily, is theology (the other, for the record, is pedagogy). Fisher refers to a few theological works, sufficient to show that he is aware of the presence of the story theology movement; but most persons in the Speech Communication field probably have not read much in that area. Lonergan's work is, as Fisher notes, very important and worth the reading for anyone in our field, not just for those interested in Christian theology. But in the bibliography appended to this paper I suggest several other theological writers who help to provide the justification for the thesis that, given the history of religions generally, and given the current state of research in at least Western Christian theologies, and given the current interest in narrative as a paradigm, we should pay more attention than we have to the issues of narrative presentation for the religious message.

Well after this paper was "finished," I received the latest Religious Communication Today. As editor John Braun remarks there, "the recurrence of the idea of 'story,' 'narrative,' and 'parable' in many of the manuscripts received seems to reflect the general popularity of that theme in our discipline just now."[3]

An extensive literature is beginning to build on the subject of narrative in religious thought. It is of three major kinds:

1. **Studies of story as vehicle of theology:** several of the sources in my bibliography aim at this issue. At best, they serve as beautiful illustrations of the use of a narrative argumentative paradigm. Even those not among the best often gain vividness in their theological insights by use of the nonlogical (not "illogical") form. Teaching in this field aims at methods of using story to get at theological

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3. "Editor's Note," RCT 9(September 1986), preceding p. 1.

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constructs.

2. **Treatments of story as vehicle for self-discovery by the storyteller:** of use in counseling psychology and in community building, this purpose for religious storytelling is very significant. The telling in this area is done by persons who are more interested in the self-revelation that is done than they are in the quality of the story. Teaching aims at methods of getting others to tell their stories in self-helpful ways.

3. **Works on using narrative as vehicle for stories already constructed either by the teller or by another source.** This is the subject of my attention here--not because I consider this purpose the most important, but because it fits the needs of those who study storytelling with me more nearly than does either of the other two purposes.

Context and uniqueness of the study

For eight years now--actually, I am in the ninth year of doing so--I have taught storytelling as a distinct course at the upper-division/graduate level. I fell into this assignment when I arrived at the campus where I now am, and have been developing it ever since. It is a difficult course to organize, and one of my greatest frustrations has been to hear persons whose preparation is minimal but who have attended a one-day workshop on story say, "I can teach storytelling, but don't give me difficult courses to teach."[4]

Because of the circumstances under which I came to be in charge of the course--it was there, a small institution requires that faculty do some things they have never done before, I had some prior experience in theatre and oral interpretation, and fools rush in--I spent some of my summer in 1978 finding out what had been done by the previous instructor (who had retired), plus doing preliminary research on the nature of the subject. Then in winter quarter of 1979 I met the class for the first time and found that much of what I had prepared actually worked. Largely, I think, that was because I had done the rhetorically right thing and had made several guesses correctly, not because I understood then what I now know about narrative. Much of the current understanding comes from long and painful introspection and continuing reading, some of which might be classified as research. Eventually I intend to share some of this "current understanding," in the narrative portions of my presentation. Before leaving this transitional, partly-narrative and partly-systematic section, however, I want to add some thoughts about the larger educational context that I think may show why mine is not the standard approach. Frankly, it is not standard in large measure simply because I began in such a strange fashion, without knowing what others were doing.

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4. This quotation may seem overly simplistic and a contrivance of mine. Actually, it is summarized from the comments of three underprepared faculty candidates we have screened, their comments differing mainly in what they consider "difficult."

That deficiency has been partly remedied. I've been reading on the subject for the past eight years. I am a member of the Seattle Storytellers' Guild and aware of the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling. At state, northwestern, western and national association conventions I have talked with colleagues from other schools. And, in 1984, I attended the short course "Speaking of Storytelling," taught by Penninah Schramm at the SCA convention.

Progress has been gradual, but it has been real. I can now clearly articulate the differences among the three major approaches to storytelling courses designed to help students use story in revealing the religious (or, with little modification, other) message. The best way I know to do that is to present a quick summary of the other two--not, as scholarly custom suggests, by way of disparaging them, but simply as a means of offering them for comparison--and then to provide a more extensive summary of my own method. Briefly, they could be called the theological-psychological approach, the theater-interpretation approach, and my own, a rhetorical approach.

The theological-psychological approach. Theologians and psychologists, like communication scholars, usually attempt to be systematic in their approach to ideas. They therefore tend to write in deductive forms, to teach deductively, and to be directed, at best, toward their theological and psychological goals. Because the topic here is the religious message, I limit my comments to those in theological traditions. In summary, story theologians and theologians of story believe that theological story is the basis for all other theology. They argue that the average person should learn to tell story effectively because that is a powerful tool to understanding of self and God. Alternatively, some take a semi-rhetorical approach which leads toward a study of "narrative preaching," confused in the minds of some with "parable." These latter--the good ones among them--intend generally that the preacher learn how to make the sermon more effective by using narrative either in, or as, the sermon/homily. The former--again, the good ones among them--show powerful appreciation for the ontological benefits of telling one's own story. Theirs is a valid approach, but not one I take in the storytelling course, so we leave it reluctantly to move on to the next style of storytelling instruction.

The theater-interpretation approach. In general, this approach looks at storytelling as a close cousin of oral interpretation. Leaving aside, for purposes of this presentation, the conflict over poetic vs. theatrical roots for the study of oral interpretation, we can fairly classify this approach as having much to commend it. Even though it can be--and is--used in developing individual stories, it works <u>best</u>, when it works, as an effective means of turning prepared written narratives into live tellable stories. In many senses, it is the most coherent approach to storytelling, because its methods at best are inductive and experiential. The student is taken phase by phase (and I do <u>not</u> mean step by step) from recognition of the potential for story, through intuitive grasp of the scene, characters, conflict, plot, climax and resolution. As the story develops in this method, its development itself is clearly seen as a narrative. Although there are problems in clarity and multi-level understanding of story in this approach, nevertheless students gain experience in producing story. The results, especially for students who

are intuitive and critical, can be outstanding. At its worst, this approach has spawned some of the weakest writing available in any field--priggish, mentally and methodologically sloppy, self-conscious in the bad but not the good sense of that term. Like the approach taken by theologians and psychologists, this can be a valid approach but is not the one I take, so we move on.

A rhetorical approach. A story has many dimensions, and each of those dimensions has an overall measurement and is composed of several sub-elements. I focus attention in the course on two such dimensions: plot line and character form. Then, for the tellings themselves (it is a performance-based skills course), I emphasize audience analysis and rhetorical purpose for the telling. The remainder of this paper offers a summary of course activities which emphasize these aspects; a full description of all the course assignments is outside my intent here. Specifically, my attention will be limited to the bibliographic assignment and the teller's outline, two assignments which, taken together, provide a rhetorical framework for the course.

Bibliographic assignment

Sometimes those things that are most important for learning in a course are those things that are most difficult to grade. I often choose to make ungraded assignments of these. First, the format of the assignment; second, the rationale for including it. This is the reverse of the order in which students hear it, because their concerns are different from those of this audience.

For the first three weeks of a 9-1/2 week quarter, with the course meeting three times weekly, each student is required to submit three story summaries in assigned format at each class session. Eliminating the first session as a time when the assignment is made, this means eight sessions include the three-summary assignment, for a total of 24 stories in three weeks. This is followed by a six-week period with three summaries due each week, and finally a week or two (depending on quarter length) when no summaries are due. No grade is given for the assignment, but it must be completed to achieve a grade of A- or higher. Fewer summaries are required for those who are willing to settle for each grade category below that. I have discovered that motivation is high, that students enjoy the assignment, and that they get into the habit of doing it so that most turn in more than 42 in the course of a quarter--typically 45 or so summaries per student.

Each summary requires a statement of the point or moral of the story, complete bibliography, a listing of the source (e.g. personal library, institutional library, oral tradition passed on by grandparents, etc.), and a narrative description of the action line in the story. Excess adjectives are discouraged; past tense required; full sentences not required; inaccurate spelling and grammar noted. I explain rationale for all these when making the assignment; the first several submissions receive my attention on each summary and are marked according to a coded sheet. Later, I simply spot check so they know I am continuing to examine the summaries.

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Why such a cumbersome assignment? I see benefits in two main areas: (1) it provides the beginnings of a bibliography which, if continued, will provide good background for future storytelling; (2) it focuses attention on plot lines and on gaining a coherent view of the story itself, independent of character and scene. Repetition at a fairly intensive level establishes a habit pattern, and continuing the repetition with less intensity helps to cement the habits over time. The initial intensity, followed by greater ease, leads the student to consider the assignment "fun" and a worthwhile break from more difficult cognitive tasks later in the school term. Some students have told me that this fact has encouraged them to continue with bibliographic gathering after the course is over. Hard data on persistence of habit are not available, but immediate and later student evaluations seem to indicate desirability for this assignment in this form.

Teller's Outline

Before each performance assignment, each student submits a teller's "outline" which might be compared to the kinds of outlines many of us require before speeches in public speaking courses. Special requirements are these:

- Audience analysis: for whom is the story intended? How many persons? What age? In what physical and psychological context? As part of an ongoing series or as a one-shot telling? and similar issues.

- Purpose: why is the story being told in this context to this audience? "To entertain with a story I like" is a common non-acceptable choice. I require some relationship among this purpose, the story, and the audience analysis.

- Bibliography, in full MLA form.

- Introduction: the means by which the audience will be set up to receive the story and to think about its meaning. If any bibliography is a part of this, it is duplicated here.

- Summary: given in more detail than in the bibliographic assignment, this summary includes some reference to character development and to some of the scenic elements. It may be in outline or narrative form, but must be coherent and consistent.

Grading of all these elements gives emphasis to rhetorical elements such as audience adaptation, coherence of the planned presentation, and evidence of systematic thought.

Conclusion

These two assignments do not describe the core of the storytelling course as I teach it, but they point out two portions of that course which

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emphasize the rhetorical element along with the elements of narrativity, interpretation, etc., which are part of other approaches to the course in storytelling. My students, many of them elementary teachers but many also working in fields such as pastoral ministries and directorships of religious education, seem to profit from this approach.

What follows is a bibliography of resources that may be useful to anyone who wishes to adopt this or another approach to a college-level storytelling course. Where I see special value in annotating, entries are annotated. This bibliography is limited almost entirely to books; it was completed before the latest number of Religious Communication Today was published, so that it includes several works not mentioned in Richard Thulin's bibliography there and does not include several other works that Thulin notes.[5] I recommend use of that bibliography as a supplement to this one.

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5. RCT 9 (September, 1986), 37-40.

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